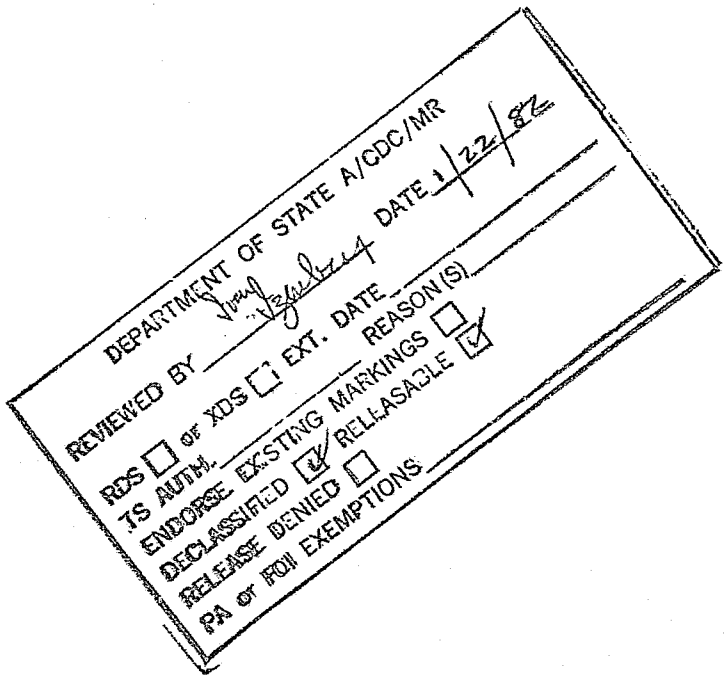
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The Candidates: President Thieu

3. As the incumbent president, Thieu is in the strongest position, but his re-election still depends on marshalling his resources well and on fashioning a skillful electoral strategy. Although he has not yet publicly said he plans to run again, he now seems to be pursuing an active campaign. He is making frequent visits to the countryside and has been speaking to a wide variety of audiences (e.g., to farmers at Vinh Binh January 16 as he gave out land titles; to the officer candidates at Thu Duc January 18; to Saigon University Students also on January 18). Through the efforts of the Vietnamese Information Service Thieu's picture is displayed in almost every hamlet in the country (in some hamlets, in every house), and Thieu is the best known man in the Vietnamese countryside.

4. As president, Thieu also has at his disposal the machinery of state. Of the four military region commanders Ngo Dzu in MR II is deeply beholden to Thieu, and the other three, who are in more independent positions, have done well under Thieu and can be expected to support him. Thieu has just carried out a partial reshuffle of province chiefs, and generally they can be counted on to do their best for him. There is little doubt that if Thieu were to wish them to, they could rig the vote to insure his victory.

5. It appears that the coalition of support Thieu plans to forge comprises Catholics, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, the ethnic minorities, most of the significant political parties, and a heavy proportion of the military and civil servants. So far Thieu has preferred cabinets of technical competence rather than cabinets that increased his political support, but the changes in the cabinet to take place after Tet may be partially designed to secure more backing from the political parties. Most of the parties are not by nature inclined to support Big Minh, and Thieu should be able to insure their allegiance with relatively little reward. Thieu has already taken measures to assuage other elements: a recent wage increase was authorized for civil and military personnel; the Hoa Hao have their long-desired university; there are plans for a Cao Dai university; and the numerous Cambodians of the Delta will get the coveted minority status on the Ethnic Minorities Council if the Lower House and the Executive approve the present bill as expected. It is generally agreed Thieu can count on a solid vote from the Montagnards.

6. The President also appears to plan to work closely with deputies and provincial councilmen to round up grass roots support. The Lower House election probably will take place August 29. Apparently Thieu intends to support the election of certain candidates on the condition they will work hard for his election a month later. Thieu has made a strong effort to appeal to the provincial councilmen, including increases in their pay and power and speaking to them at a meeting at the Palace, and he evidently hopes they will supplement efforts by other elements in his behalf. The President has also made an effort to appeal to village and hamlet officials by placing high priority on the speeches he makes to graduating classes of the Vung Tau training center.

7. Thieu will run on his record of having brought major improvement in security and in prosperity, particularly in the countryside of MR III and IV. To his disadvantage are the issues of corruption, war weariness, and the rise in the cost of living. It remains to be seen how he will handle the peace issue: whether he will stand firmly as the defender of the country against Communist aggression or offer further peace initiatives designed (in part) to dull the impression that other candidates would work harder to end the war than he. Thieu's public image is grey. He is not popular, but neither is there much passionate criticism of him. Educated people often consider him slow in decision, somewhat of a loner, and devious, but he is widely regarded as able.

Big Minh

8. General Minh also has yet to say flatly he is a candidate, although most Vietnamese assume he is one and he in fact has been holding private meetings with possible supporters. He has yet to clarify his views on the major issues. The somewhat vague statements he has made suggest that he is more "flexible" than Thieu on negotiating issues. This is not surprising for an aspirant trying to unseat an incumbent.

9. Minh still retains widespread popularity as the leader of the revolt against Diem and as a man of virtue. He has a generally benign and fatherly image, although his name has faded some in the years since 1963. Among educated people, however, Minh suffers from a reputation of lack of ability and personal force, it being felt he botched the task of leadership in the four months after the overthrow of Diem before he was toppled by General Nguyen Khanh. In character Minh seems old-fashioned in a Confucian way, with a mystical side to his nature. Based on past performance and what is known of his character it seems his style of leadership, if he were elected, would be to stand above ordinary administration and politics.

10. It is precisely these figurehead qualities of Minh which make him particularly attractive to opposition groups who would entertain the hope of being able to dominate a government headed by Minh. The opposition An Quang Buddhists have so far apparently not made a decision on supporting Minh, but most likely will do so. An Quang showed impressive strength in the senatorial election, and, if it enthusiastically turned out the vote for Minh, he would probably make a strong showing in MR I and coastal MR II. Some southern elements will probably support Minh as a fellow southerner, and he should draw votes from certain political factions, urban areas and students who are traditionally inclined to opposition.

11. One important political party, the Progressive Nationalist Movement, now appears to be wavering between Thieu and Minh, but its support for Minh might be especially important in that its skilled politicians would be most useful to Minh as advisors and campaign managers. One of Minh's major weaknesses now is in advisors. His cronies are mostly French-oriented figures of the past like former Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho and former Generals Le Van Kim and Mai Huu Xuan.

12. Minh, however, has potent issues to exploit. An unknown lawyer of shady reputation like Truong Dinh Dzu received 17 percent of the vote by exploiting the peace issue in 1967, and Minh is far more respected. With four more years of war, people are even more war weary. Thieu has done little against corruption. Minh, with his virtuous image, need say nothing on this and will still be able to give the impression that his administration would be more honest. The cost of living issue is of personal importance to the voters and could be exploited heavily by the challenger to Thieu.

Ky

13. Vice President Ky acts as if he wants to run for the presidency. He has been traveling widely, mostly visiting troops, and has made highly publicized trips to the United States and Cambodia. He makes no secret of his differences with Thieu. He appears to be casting around for support, although little is clearly evident for him now. He does, however, have some appeal to segments of the military, the Catholics, and youth as a man of bold views and action. His basic problem remains that he is a northerner, and thus repugnant to the majority of the voters of South Viet-Nam. He has no real chance to be elected president and would be fortunate to be a vice presidential candidate with either of the two main contenders. He probably would have difficulty complying with the restriction in the presidential election bill as passed by the Lower House requiring sponsorship by 40 senators and deputies or by 100 provincial councilors.

14. For Thieu a Ky candidacy is dangerous in that it could split the support that Thieu is counting on. The Lower House version of the electoral law may be designed to preclude Ky from running. Some Vietnamese observers feel that Ky is peeved enough at Thieu to run to spoil Thieu's chances (or that he will ally with Minh); others feel that Ky is patriotic and will not run if that would ensure victory by Minh and his expected coalition of supporters. Thieu might have to insure Ky's support by offering him the vice presidential candidacy again.

Running Mates

15. For both the main candidates, however, it is to their interest to balance the ticket for the widest appeal. For Thieu (who is Catholic and from Central Viet-Nam) a southern Buddhist civilian as vice presidential candidate would theoretically be ideal, and for Southerner and Buddhist Minh a Catholic civilian from Central or North Viet-Nam would be the best. For both men it will probably be impossible to find the ideal man. Besides Ky, the possibilities for Thieu now talked about include Upper House Chairman Huyen, Prime Minister Khiem, former Prime Minister Huong (who is in ill health), Vung Tau Training Center Director Colonel Be, and CVT leader Buu, but no one yet seems the probable candidate. For Minh the vice presidential possibilities now discussed include again Ky and Chairman Huyen, Dr. Ho Van Minh of the Lower House, Supreme Court Justice Tiet, Professors Huy and Bong of the Progressive Nationalist Movement, and Senators Mau and Thuan of the An Quang-backed slate in the Senate election last year. The election bill also contains provision for a supplementary vice presidential candidate who can replace the vice presidential candidate if for some reason he is forced to drop out before election day. This will put three names on the ticket and permit an additional increment of balance.

Prospects Fade for a Compromise Candidate

16. Former general and senator Tran Van Don and others continue, but with diminishing vigor, to try to arrange a compromise between Thieu and Minh to avoid a divisive campaign between them. While there is some logic for such a compromise, and MR I CG Hoang Xuan Lam has indicated support for this, such a compromise does not seem likely. Minh, as a former Chief of State, would find it hard to take a subordinate position to Thieu, although it is conceivable he might accept the position of Chief of the Joint General Staff. If Minh accepts a compromise, or if he withdraws from the election for some other reason, Thieu would probably be running completely or virtually unopposed for reelection.

Other Determinants

17. The election is still eight months off and events can seriously affect the prospects for the major candidates. Disintegration of the military situation (which appears unlikely) could reinforce war weariness, and blur Thieu's record of having improved security for the people. In Military Regions I and II particularly, the enemy has the ability to mount attacks designed to influence the elections, and events in Cambodia could also have their effect.

18. The course of the economy will be most important. If prices are held firm, the economic reforms conspicuously successful, and the pay raises for soldiers and officials enough, Minh as challenger will be weakened. If the rate of inflation returns to former levels, Thieu will be hurt. The prospects appear to be for a slow-down in the inflation that will be seen by some as an impressive accomplishment considering the war situation; but we doubt that it will be enough to neutralize inflation as an issue useful to Minh.

19. Another major factor influencing the election will be American policies. Vietnamization seems accepted by Vietnamese as inevitable; certainly it has caused surprisingly little concern, apparently because of confidence in the ARVN and in our continued air, logistics and economic support. Deviations in our steadfastness will be interpreted by Vietnamese as signifying loss of faith in the present administration. Generally our attitude on the two candidates will be watched closely and probably often wildly interpreted as support for one candidate or the other. The best stance for us seems to be one of impartiality with a stated interest in a fair democratic election.

20. Since Minh is personally more popular and has the issues of inflation, corruption, and war weariness to exploit, he is a formidable challenger. President Thieu, however, in the three years of his administration has been adept in balancing the political forces and has usually shown careful political judgment. Since he is the incumbent, he has wide scope for action, both fair and otherwise, to improve his electoral chances, and accordingly must be rated the favorite. If there is to be popular acceptance of this as an honest election, Thieu is going to have to lean backwards to overcome public suspicions on the manner of his electoral victory.

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Campaign Outlook

21. An unfortunate side-effect of the election could be the exacerbation of divisions in South Vietnamese society, particularly between the Catholics and the Buddhists. So far both Thieu and Minh have used moderate terms in discussing the election, and the style of both men makes a relatively restrained and dignified campaign likely. Religious leaders on both sides have also shown an awareness of the dangers of division, and at this point the chances for a constructive and non-divisive campaign seem reasonably good. A restrained campaign should set the tone for reactions by the partisans of the losing candidate. If President Thieu wins, which seems the more likely prospect, a moderate campaign and an honest election would avoid giving the more militant Buddhist leaders an excuse to take to the streets as they did a number of times during the 1960's. Similarly, if Minh adopts a moderate position on peace issues during the campaign, then the possibility will be greatly reduced of a right-wing coup against him if he wins.

22. After Tet, there will continue to be much backstage discussion among political groups as most of them gradually line up behind one or the other candidate. As the pending election bills now read, Presidential candidacies must be filed by August 4, which will give President Thieu an opportunity to see exactly who among the incumbent deputies and provincial councilors is willing to sponsor him, in exchange for the President's support in the August 29 Lower House election. It will be necessary for candidates to make public their three-man lists a reasonable period of time prior to August 4 in order to allow time for obtaining the signatures of sponsors. The campaign period for the Presidency begins only 30 days before the campaigning, presumably including TV and radio as well as posters and handbills. Under Vietnamese law expenses are paid by the government and campaign facilities for all candidates must be exactly equal. As in the US, this gives some advantage to the incumbent who gains publicity while carrying out his role as President.

BERGER

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

AIRGRAM

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HANDLING INDICATOR (C To TAT)

RECEIVED

TO : Department of State

INFO : BANGKOK, CINCPAC, DANANG, USDEL FRANCE, VIENTIANE, CINCPAC FOR POLAD

FROM : Amembassy SAIGON

DATE: February 10, 1971

SUBJECT : President Thieu's Tet Message - A Campaign Kickoff

REF : Saigon

1. President Thieu has long been engaged in tours of the countryside and other activities designed to promote his reelection, but his Tet message to the nation might be said to mark the actual beginning of his campaign. In the enclosed message Thieu specifically refers to the forthcoming Lower House and presidential elections, stating the people's choice will determine the destiny of the country and of the people themselves.

2. The message stresses the accomplishments of the Thieu administration in restoring security and prosperity for the people and repeats Thieu's standard hard-line position for domestic consumption on peace (no prospects for negotiation; we must destroy the Communists). Thieu previously has often implied that critics of his position on war and peace are in effect defeatists or lackeys of the Communists, but this message carries the theme considerably further: "the Communists still nourish a last wish, namely for a defeatist government in the South and for a leader who does not have a firm anti-Communist stand, who is naive and easily duped by them at the conference table, or who can be surrounded by their underground lackeys and led to surrender to the Communists by means of accepting coalition, neutrality, territorial concessions, or leaving the Communist party free to do what it pleases in the South."

3. President Thieu continued to avoid any public mention of his possible opponent, General Minh, and stress mainly his own record. However, this Tet message raises by a few degrees the temperature of the campaign oratory, and may be indicative of President Thieu's election platform. The GVN is printing with its own resources over ten million copies for distribution.

Encl: As stated.

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